

Service Learning with “Third-Culture Kids”: Preparing an Iftar in Egypt

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Many international schools embrace social studies education, and service learning embedded within the social studies curriculum is often the norm rather than the exception. “These activities present a clear picture of the focus, energy, and grassroots nature of the service-learning movement that is emerging from the needs of schools and young people throughout the world. Scattered and disconnected as these efforts might currently be, it is clear that a network of international service learning is thriving.” Helping students help others in any setting is powerful. In a richly diverse venue there are added benefits. The “third-culture kids” attending international schools possess culturally varied backgrounds. Service learning allows them to collaborate, share perspectives, discover similarities, and connect with the host community. In the process, students develop life skills such as commitment, cooperation, and tolerance.

The service learning described here is a fifth grade project and stems from my recent years of teaching at an international school in Egypt. This preK-12 school hosts an annual charity festival and has a history of community service that has led to a service-learning requirement in the curriculum.

Students in the International School

Although many students at the school are Egyptian, most are “third-culture kids” (TCKs), a term coined by Ruth Hill Useem, a pioneer researcher of internationally mobile children. These foreign and U.S. children live away from their home countries during all or part of their formative years because of their parents’ life choices.² A TCKs’ culture is an amalgam of many unique experiences. TCKs often adjust to the conventions and expectations of the host country, study the language, and establish close, though often temporary, relationships with foreigners. Findings in a major study of American-based TCKs conducted in the 1990s by Useem and others found that they emerge as adults who are comfortable with diversity and demonstrate adaptability and perseverance.³ Perhaps the most well-known TCK to date is President Barack Obama, who attended school in Indonesia during part of his childhood. He has said that these life experiences greatly influenced his ability to bring diverse people together.⁴

In my class, there were 18 students representing nine countries, and the other four fifth-grade classes were similarly diverse. While some of the students’ home countries harbored opposing, political views, the children, in the setting of an international school, negotiated peace among themselves through learned conflict resolution strategies. With their extended families far away, TCKs’ support systems and friendships (which are so vital for personal happiness) depend on cross-cultural, cross-national relationships.

Service Learning and Academics

The school in which I taught implemented traditional U.S. curricula in all disciplines. Teachers, administrators and parents supported a service-learning feature integrated into the social studies curriculum. The project connected specific academic components to enrich learning with an action to meet a community need, and one key purpose was to teach civic responsibility.⁵

First, the academic component of this project was a holistic composite of knowledge and dispositions skillfully drawn from several social studies themes and interwoven with peace education. For their basic social studies curriculum, approximately 90 fifth graders, within five classrooms, researched and examined the social studies concepts of freedom, innovation, and migration throughout a trimester school year. Students investigated each concept through an inquiry process, and guiding questions for this process corresponded to the ten thematic strands of the social studies curriculum standards.⁶ Through the guiding questions, students analyzed various social studies disciplines, their relationships to major social studies concepts, and their relationships to each other. The faculty also inserted a set of common beliefs, in the form of peace-education benchmarks, to enhance the PreK-5 social studies curriculum. The fifth grade service-learning project, viewed as social studies enrichment, addressed the social studies themes of

1 CULTURE

7 PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION

10 CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES

The peace education component of the service-learning activity included all three levels of the school’s process: peace keeping, peace making and peace building. These was a special emphasis on

respectful communication and interaction with others as well as encouragement in democratic, collaborative decision-making.

Service Learning and Action

Second, the community need was to provide a *Ramadan Iftar* for the general services employees at the school, mainly custodians and grounds keepers. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, based on a combination of physical sightings of the moon and astronomical calculations. The end of the ninth month marks a final celebration called *Eid-ul-Fitr*. Simply stated, Ramadan is a special time for Muslims to practice self-control, intense devotion to God, and inner reflection. From dawn to dusk, fasting is obligatory for most Muslims. People gather at sunset to break the fast with a meal and celebration called "Iftar." The emphasis during Ramadan is on community and acknowledgement of people less fortunate, so it is common practice for Muslims to share Iftar with neighbors or guests from outside the usual family circle.

Finally, one of the key purposes of service learning projects is to teach and promote civic responsibility. Participatory citizens are active and participate in the social life of the communities, learning how to plan and organize efforts to help people in need.⁷ Starting in first grade, our students were formally involved in a different service-learning project each year with increasing complexity and personal involvement. By fifth grade, although teachers and parents were there to guide and support them, students engaged in collaborative planning, decision-making, and problem solving to fulfill their projects. These projects involved helping the others while respecting the mores and traditions of the host culture, so tolerance and understanding were also essential.

Raising Funds, Purchasing Goods

To prepare the Iftar, the fifth graders needed to purchase enough food to feed more than 100 people. Students asked parents and friends to pledge money based on the students themselves working after school with the custodians to clean the classrooms and grounds.

After several weeks of work, students pooled their money and prepared a menu, budget, and shopping list, calculating the kilos of meat, vegetables, rice, dessert, and other ingredients needed for the meal. With the assistance of the Egypt Culture teachers, who are local educators, students identified vendors and grocers who could provide good quality products at reasonable prices.



Students also made lists of the extra serving dishes and utensils needed for the dinner, and they borrowed those items from their parents.

Each of the five fifth-grade classes shopped for various items, making trips to the butcher, the vegetable vender, and the grocer. In these markets, the cost of food was less, but food was also less conveniently processed and packaged. There were large pieces of meat from the butcher, and produce was straight from the fields with no previous cleaning or trimming done. Dry rice contained tiny bits of stalks or weeds from the rice field, and there were no instant mixes for the drinks.

Preparing a Meal

On meal preparation day, parents and teachers supervised teams of students who peeled and chopped vegetables, washed and trimmed cuts of meat, sifted through rice for tiny bits of stems or leaves, and prepared the desserts and drinks. As might be expected, the



onion-chopping table was the least popular, but students developed a strategy. Like runners in a relay race, they encouraged one another and handed over the “baton,” metaphorically speaking, when team members became too tearful to chop onions any longer. Desserts were uncooked, so students could assemble those, and adults cooked the meat, rice, and vegetables with assistance from students.

After the food was prepared, students set tables with borrowed tablecloths and placed bowls of food on each table for family-style dining. It was exhausting work, requiring numerous hours and people, but when the Iftar began, it was a heartwarming sight to see school workers and students sitting side-by-side, sharing this important meal.



Applying New Knowledge

Classroom discussions in fifth grade and Egypt Culture classes (as well as a follow-up project) allowed teachers to make performance-based assessments of student learning. In the days following the Iftar, students reflected on the process and skills they learned, noting changes to consider “next time.” Then, during the same academic year, they applied their learning to a new situation. In small groups, students planned games and activities for children living in an impoverished community across town. During a visit to this school, our students led these activities, and also provided snacks and milk, which were significant luxuries for the other children.

Challenges for Implementation

There are, of course, challenges in planning and implementing a project of this nature, in U.S. schools. Educators who truly wish to teach participatory citizenship skills through service learning need time to plan together. Often teachers feel pushed to “get it all in” before testing, and they may not feel that three weeks, or more, spent on a service learning project is possible.

Another challenge might be adult participation. Projects like this one require investments of time and guidance by interested adults, particularly those who will offer students the freedom and trust to explore and implement their ideas. In our case, the Egypt Culture Department and parents of fifth graders were instrumental in guiding and assisting our students through the process.

Finally, the theme used for our project, an Iftar, was specific to this particular community. Teachers and students must consider possible projects within the context of their own community’s needs and resources. For example, when planning to serve a meal to other children or to adults, students in the United States should coordinate with their school’s cafeteria manager, who would help them read about and follow health regulations.

Regardless of these challenges, if teachers start with a small

project, and expand and improve it a bit each year, they may find that students’ social studies learning and community interest grow with the project.

Conclusion

All students can benefit from service learning projects; however, they can be particularly helpful for students with diverse backgrounds. The Iftar project brought our third-culture kids together for a common cause. By working through collaborative processes, they all excelled.

Commitment to service learning, in schools such as this one, demonstrates that, when children have opportunities and support, they can learn civic responsibility and skills with anyone and in any place in the world. 🌍

Notes

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3. Debra A. McLachlan, “The Impact of Globalization on Internationally Mobile Families: A Grounded Theory Analysis,” *Journal of Theory Construction and Testing* 9, no. 1 (2005): 14-20.
4. TheBlueStateDOTComStation, “What if Barack Obama Actually Did Win?” CNN News, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAPD8COEPnc.
5. Leslie F. Hergert, “Snapshots of Service-Learning: Factors for Its Integration and Sustainability in School Districts,” *Educational Horizons* 80, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 195-199.
6. National Council for the Social Studies. *Expectations for Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
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